DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 031 378 RE 001 821

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The Usefulness of Children's Books in the Reading Program.

Pub Date May 69

Note-11p.; Paper presented at the International Reading Association conference, Kansas City, Mo., Apr. 30-May 3, 1969.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.65

Descriptors-*Childrens Books, Literature, Reading Development, Reading Instruction, Reading Materials, Reading Programs

Suggestions of potential uses for non-textbooks in classrooms are made according to the conviction that books should be a central portion of reading instruction. In readiness and initial reading instruction non-textbooks can be used to create a desire to read, to develop readiness skills, to develop reading skills associated with comprehension and word study, and to provide entry into literature. In later stages of reading instruction books can be used to practice reading skills, to individualize instruction, and to stimulate voluntary reading. Research into the use of books in these ways is surveyed, and the conclusion is reached that the teacher will find many specific ways to use non-textbooks in his classroom. References are included. (MD)

ED031378

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The Usefulness Of Children's Books In the Reading Program

Session: Literature for Children

RE001 821

It has become very unfashionable these days to talk about the usefulness of literature. A judicious comment to the effect that books help to fulfill children's psychological needs is acceptable, providing that it is not spoken with too much enthusiasm. A restrained suggestion that certain types of literature, possibly, in some instances, might further a child's social awareness and development, is acceptable also, if one is careful of the professional company he keeps. But by and large, it is rather gauche today to suggest that books have utilitarian purposes.

They do. And unfortunately, the average classroom teacher does not recognize the many potential ways that non-text books can be used to achieve the objectives of the reading program. The following suggestions spring from the conviction that books must be central in the instructional program in reading.

During Readiness and Initial Reading Instruction

Creating a desire to read. Every teacher of readiness and beginning reading knows how important an active desire to read is to the success of a child's first experiences in learning to read. It would be comforting to think that all children come to school with a background of knowledge of books and a burning desire to read. This is just not true. Many children come to school from homes where reading assumes little importance, where parents seldom read, and where homes are virtually devoid of appealing books and magazines. Too, an alarming number of children from more affluent homes come to school with a similar lack of experience with books for their parents are so busy they have little time to select and read appropriate books to preschool children.

Young children cannot develop a desire to read if they do not first know what is in books. Many children come to school with no experience with informational books. Very few children entering school have had an effective exposure to the many fascinating books of poetry for young children. Most children's experience with stories have been limited to perhaps one or two of the many types of stories available today.

Carefully planned experiences with a variety of carefully chosen picture books can almost guarantee that all children during readiness and initial reading experiences will develop a strong interest in books and a healthy desire to read.

Developing Readiness Skills. Nearly all of the many skills we usually associate with readiness for reading can be developed or reinforced by using picture books. Reading aloud can help to provide a variety of listening experiences. When teachers plan books

as part of the strategy of the listening and auditory discrimination development, children's awareness of and capacity for discrimination and interpretation can be greatly enhanced.

Because picture books are a unique artistic expression combining spoken or written text with pictures, many visual discrimination tasks develop naturally from seeing and interpreting the pictures in books. Moving carefully from gross to fine discrimination tasks, the teacher can lead the child through a series of visual experiences designed to stimulate fine visual discrimination--one of the abilities most essential for the reader. The task of attending to visual details does not come easily or naturally to many young children. Using picture books for this experience is pleasant, painless, and frankly much more interesting to children than running a pencil or a finger through endless mazes and worksheets.

Likewise, books provide a natural setting for the foundation of a host of comprehension and interpretation skills: finding the main idea or most important event, noticing and interpreting important or interesting details, making inferences. These skills develop naturally from informal discussion following the reading of a book, because these skills are necessary for enjoyment of the book.

Concept development can be stimulated by experiences with the great variety of books for younger children available today. The range of subject matter introduced by stories and non-story books in picture book format today is staggering. The success these books have in awakening the child to the world around him and in interesting him in previously unfamiliar ideas and information is consistent with current findings of the great capacity young children have to deal with subject matter previously thought to be too advanced for them.

Language development can also be stimulated by varied experiences

listening to literature read aloud. The range of subject matter in today's picture books introduced vocabulary both varied and rich. Listening to books read is a natural bridge between the young child's knowledge of vocabulary and linguistic patterns learned through oral language and the vocabulary and linguistic patterns of written language. The differences between oral and written languages are too often overlooked in readiness and initial reading instruction; listening experiences are vital in children's developing sense of the likenesses and differences between the two.

Developing literature entry skills. Early (5), has identified three stages in the development of appreciation of literature, the first of which is unconscious enjoyment. Burton (3), has proposed a hierarchy of skills necessary for imaginative entry into reading literature.

Many children and adults who have been through the set of experiences and learning environments that we call reading programs never develop into habitual readers. If the main objective of the reading program is not to run children through readers, but rather to make readers out of children, then perhaps we ought to look more seriously into the figures published annually that indicate the American adult public is basically not a reading minded people. Compared with other so called "civilized nations", each year we rank low in the figures of number of books read per person, numbers of hours spent in reading, number of books borrowed from libraries, or number of books purchased.

Perhaps one of the reasons that some children and adults never develop into real readers is that they have never developed some of the attitudes and skills necessary to really enjoy reading. Their heart does not beat faster with the racing climax of a plot, they cannot lose themselves identifying with the problems of book characters,

they cannot feel the impact of a well constructed theme, see the beauty of fine writing style, or quickly and efficiently find information when they need it.

Such people have not been introduced to literary skills in sequence which makes mastery of those skills possible. Fortunately for children today, the variety of types of books available provide a natural training ground for literature entry skills. Folk tales are the seed bed of plot recognition and appreciation. Realistic stories present characters with whom it is easy to identify. Fantasy stimulates and keeps alive the imagination. Hero stories stimulate desire for achievement. Funny stories develop appreciation for humor. Unusual stories help to feed the appetite for that most choice literary experience--finding the unexpected between the covers of a book. Pleasant experiences with fiction, non-fiction, and poetry help younger children develop a great range of skills necessary to locate, extract, and make meaning out of the great reservoir of knowledge and human experience contained in literature.

One thing is certain however. Literature cannot do all this for young children if experience with books continues to be on a hit-and-miss basis, or reserved as a treat for "good boys and girls." With the pressures of curriculum change in the education of young children many teachers have developed a sense of guilt associated with the time they spend reading or telling stories to children. Yet as many people who have worked with young children know, classroom activities that sometimes look the least instructional can in effect be the most educational.

Cohen's (4), recent study with low achieving second grade children in New York City demonstrates the value of a systematic use of literature the reading-language arts program of young children. Carefully chosen

books were read aloud to children daily and follow up activities were suggested. After an eight month period, scores for children with the daily literature experience were compared with children who were given literature as an "occasional treat". Although the tests revealed no significant difference in word discrimination as measured on the Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test, children in the group having daily experience with literature showed an increase in gross vocabulary, word knowledge, quality of vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Cohen concluded that reading aloud to children is an important precursor to success in learning to read, is an important contributor to young children's transition from comprehension of oral language to the use of symbols in reading, that vocabulary learnings with slower children appear to happen successfully in the meaningful context of story reading, that levels of competency of reading seem to be dependent on facility of oral language and word meaning. Although Cohen's population was a "socially disadvantaged" one, there is little reason to suspect the same results might not be expected from a less disadvantaged population.

After Children Begin to Read

Practicing reading skills. Using non-text books in the reading program for older children has several advantages, too. The first of these is simply to provide practice in reading skills. Even when reading skills are immature, books help to reinforce skills that have been learned and are developing. For many years reading teachers wrung their hands and cried out in pitiful supplication to publishers to produce material of the so called high interest, low vocabulary type. We now have these materials in such abundance we don't know what to do with them. The material ranges from some with vocabulary and sentence structure tightly controlled to the more loosely controlled and on to

vast quantities of material written in non-controlled but naturally easy-to-read style. These materials are available in a great variety of subjects in fiction and non-fiction form.

Simultaneously the increase in the number of publishers of juvenile literature and the size of the lists of the publishers has multiplied the number of books produced for children annually, books that in no way are controlled in vocabulary, concept load, or literary style.

As a result complaints of a paucity of materials that are readable and interesting to children are no longer valid. Plenty of material is available at many skill levels for children to practice their developing reading skills.

Individualizing instruction. The variety of materials suitable for and interesting to children make it now possible for teachers to consider seriously that goal for which we have been striving for years, the individualizing of instruction. Children's books now offer practical assistance to the teacher who desires at least a partially individualized reading program.

The variety and quality of the materials offers to the teacher also the practical reality of individualizing curriculum areas other than reading. The now common practice of purchasing trade books to supplement approved texts offers to teachers opportunities to provide to students with high and low extremes of reading skills materials that are alternatives to the textbook. If the text book treatment of South America is too advanced for slow students, too tame for the bright ones, a trip to the school or public library is all that is needed for materials suitable for students.

Similarly, non-text books provide additional materials that go beyond the text to more specific treatments of individual topics or materials that parallel text books with additional information of a

wider scope. The abundance of materials has now made obsolete the teacher's dependence upon the single text and has made it practical for children to satisfy interests sparked by brief curricular treatments.

Stimulating the habit of voluntary reading. Parents, teachers, and reading authorities often refer to the intermediate grades as being a "Golden Age of Reading" for children. If one were to believe all that he read, we would assume that children in grades four through eight read voraciously, plowing through great mounds of books with unrestrained glee. They don't.

It is difficult to discover where this "Golden Age of Reading" idea began. It is certainly not indicated in the results of the few research studies in recreational reading that have been conducted. Although teachers and librarians like to think that children in the middle grades read a book or two a week, research indicates that they don't. A figure closer to reality is probably less than half a book a week.

Years ago Burger, Cohen, and Bisgaier (2), succeeded in tripling the amount of reading done voluntarily by a large population of urban, below middle class children. Their treatment was hardly what would be called revolutionary. They simply put books into classrooms and as part of the reading instruction program encouraged children to read books outside of school. Children read voluntarily more books than they ever had before. A follow up check noted that a year later the children were still reading voluntarily, they had established the habit of reading--they had become readers.

Recently, a more closely controlled study (1), examined the reading patterns of advantaged children. In advantaged suburban schools with libraries, librarians, reading teachers, well-trained classroom teachers, were the advantaged children reading voluntarily? No, they weren't. Although their reading skills were well above national norms, the children read on the average about half a book a week. Testing the validity of the concept of accessibility of books being a key to motivating children to read more, interesting looking books were added to the classroom, the immediate environment of the children. When books were added, the number of books read voluntarily increased by fifty percent. Testing the validity of recommendations by teachers and peers to motivate more voluntary reading, books and verbal recommendations were added to the environment of daily classroom activities. The number of books read was tripled. The results with a completely different population of children were amazingly similar to those recorded by Burger, Cohen and Bisgaier.

Preoccupation with the teaching of reading skills sometimes causes a loss of perspective on the eventual goal of the reading program. That goal is to make the experience of reading meaningful to individuals. It cannot be expected that all students will read for the same general or specific purposes: some read for information, some for relaxation, some for stimulation, some for other reasons. But the ends of reading instruction are never in sight until individual learners begin to develop the habit of reaching out to reading to satisfy inner needs and interests. Until children or adults reach out actively and voluntarily to read, the teaching of reading skills can be only minimally successful.

It is true that for a time we can create artificial needs to read for children in the classroom. Younger children learn some things because their teachers want them to. But as a child achieves independence, it is more and more difficult to stimulate learning artificially. What teacher has not seen the dull faces of older children--some resigned, some hostile, some simply vapid because it is the teacher and the school not the children who feel a need for children to learn to read. What a difference is present when schools and teachers are satisfying rather than creating a need to read.

If teachers are going to use children's books in the reading program, there may be some additional information, skills and attitudes for teachers to learn. They may have to learn a bit more about the children's books available today. They may have to refine their methods of learning from children what children find appealing in books. Teachers may have to practice location skills so they can find good materials in libraries with greater ease and efficiency. They may even have to exert some influence in obtaining quantity of and quality in books for their school or public library. But these are all clearly defined tasks well within the reach of committed teachers. These things would be a small price to pay for a generation of readers who not only could read but who did read.

It is entirely possible that deliberate, consistent use of children's literature in the reading program could prove to be a healthy addition to current strategies with children before they begin to read and at each step of the developmental process. It is certainly time for a re-evaluation of the use of children's books in the reading program and a sharpening of the effectiveness of methods of bringing children and books together.

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